

The Farm

During the last few years of high school, my friends and I would work each summer at the muck farm in Zellwood. We weren't actually farming, but instead were employed at the "pre-cooler" where crates of corn were cooled before being loaded onto trucks and heading off to market.

They were called muck farms because it was land that had once been wetlands, and when drained, the soil was rich and black. In the early 1940s, huge sections on the north side of Lake Apopka, the state's second largest lake, were cordoned off with dikes so that the wetlands could be separated and drained. As you can imagine, that land was incredibly fertile and for decades, massive amounts of sweetcorn, carrots and other produce were grown there.

When water was needed for irrigation or to flood the fields, it was released from Lake Apopka, and when the time came, excess water was pumped back into the lake. The problem was that those fields were inundated with fertilizer and pesticides that ended up back in Lake Apopka. Add to that, neighboring cities, citrus plants and other industrial waste was also flowing into the lake, and you can see the impending disaster.

The once thriving lake with almost 100 fish camps on its shore, slowly died as the water became more and more polluted and the game fish were no longer able to survive. The other problem was that Lake Apopka was the beginning of the "chain of lakes" and those contaminants passed through Lakes Dora, Eustis, Harris, and up through the Ocklawaha River, into the St. Johns and out to the Atlantic ocean. It was a mess.

After decades of various proposed solutions, the government eventually paid the farmers \$100 million to purchase the farmland in the late 1990s. Remediation efforts are still ongoing. It took decades to kill the lake, and it's going to take a long time for it to come back, but progress is being made.

My father was involved in this area because he was a broker for several farmers who worked the land. His job was to sell the produce they grew, and that meant he had to know when the vegetables would be ready for harvest. Then he had to find someone willing to buy it and have a truck at the right place and the right time to pick it up and deliver it.

In the case of corn, when it was ready to be picked, a huge machine drove through the fields, with men walking along between the tall rows of stalks, using knives to remove each ear and putting them on a conveyor belt that led to the top of this gigantic contraption. It was there that women would take those ears and stack at least 48 of them in crates made of thin wood and wire. When the crates were full, they were rolled down to the end, tossed onto a waiting truck, and then stacked 42 to a pallet.

These field jobs were awful, the worst being the guys who had to walk in the suffocating heat, with each breath a mixture of toxic chemicals. The picking season was always in the summer, so it was extremely hot and humid. In our area during

the early 70s, all of the workers were Black. The farmworkers in this area are now mostly Hispanic, but it wasn't the case then.

When that corn left the field it was extremely hot and it needed to be cooled down quickly before it would rot. A couple of the farmers created a system where these pallets were brought to a building and each crate was offloaded onto a conveyor belt that slowly dipped into a long pool of incredibly cold water that removed the heat from the corn. After about 45 minutes traveling through this frigid bath, the crates would reappear on the other end and be loaded back onto a pallet and then stored in a refrigerated room until they were ready to be loaded onto trucks.

My father and a group of his farmers decided they had a more efficient way to remove the field heat and formed the "Growers Precooler" around 1970. They built a massive, insulated, concrete building where the cooling and refrigerated storage could happen in the same place without having to remove individual crates.

The idea was that this room would have individual bays where pallets of corn could be stacked high in long rows, and nozzles above them would spray very cold water on top of each row for about an hour, thus bringing down the temperature of the corn. After that the corn could stay there in the refrigerated room until a truck arrived and it was time to load.

It was the job of our gang of boys to drive the forklift trucks that loaded the pre-cooler and later removed them, bringing them to trucks that had backed up to the loading dock. One minute you'd be outside in the blistering heat and humidity, and the next you'd be going into the frigid storage room where you almost always got wet.

We also used pneumatic staple guns to attach labels to the outside of the crates that indicated the brand, and my father had several, including "Buster's Blue" and "Instant Sex". That last one featured the kind of rooster my dad raised as a kid, and the provocative title was meant to get attention ... and it did!

Being the troublemaking teenage boys that we were, there was a trick we would play on any unsuspecting new guy that they would only fall for once. There were times when you would have a row inside the precooler that was empty, with one on each side that was stacked high with pallets. That would require the forklift driver to take a new pallet of crates in between those two long rows and place it at the very end. At that point we would drive another forklift of crates behind him, and run away while someone turned on the nozzles in that bay, thus trapping the unknowing driver under a torrent of freezing water, and having to figure a way to crawl out to escape. We thought that was hilarious.

Once we delivered a pallet of crates to the back of a truck, someone had to stack them inside, and that's where the "loaders" came in. These guys were incredibly strong Black men who were paid by the piece. They were brought in for this specific job and then would move on to the next crop, wherever that might be. They made good money and they deserved it, as it was demanding work. Each crate weighed 40 to 50 pounds and they worked two men per truck, removing the crates from the pallet and stacking them in neat rows across the inside of the trailer. They were fast and efficient, and watching them work looked like a choreographed ballet. When

they were finished with a pallet, we would bring in a new one, slowly backing out as the vehicle was filled. Because the trailer ceiling was 9 feet tall, the tricky part came when they had to throw the crates up high, the hardest part being the last hole in the corner that had to be filled. These guys would make a game of it by flinging the heavy crate up in the air and having it spin before it perfectly slid into that one remaining spot. A truck could easily hold 750 crates of corn, which meant they were moving 40,000 pounds in a short amount of time, moving onto the next one, day after day.

Every once in a while when a truck was running late and the loaders were ready for some nighttime activities, they would pay us boys the \$30 or so to stay and do the job for them. Our salary was two dollars per hour and it took 50 hours to make overtime, so the extra money was enticing. We thought of ourselves as fairly strong, athletic kids, but quickly gained a new respect for the task. Not only was it exhausting, but it took twice as long, and there were times when trying to get a crate of corn to fit into the last remaining slot that it ended with a smash of corn flying everywhere.

When there was downtime between loading, these guys would clean and polish their cars, which looked like vehicles right out of a gangster movie. They were always huge Lincolns or Cadillacs, with wide whitewall tires, and ornate interiors, often with a working television. It didn't seem as if any of them owned a home, so all of their income went to their "lifestyle" which included fancy clothes and dating women.

That's the part my friends and I wanted to hear about, as these guys were definitely having sex, and we were not. Each year they would all stay at the same motel near Apopka and would tell us about the women who would visit them, along with lurid details of their exploits. To our astonishment, it also included tales of how some of them had sex with men, not considering it to be homosexual behavior at all, but rather just another conquest.

By the middle of July, the fields were empty, the trucks no longer arrived, and we would go back to our normal lives as teenage boys. It was a defining experience for many of us, certainly making us aware of a life we didn't want to lead, and at the same time gaining a respect for all that it takes to produce and deliver the food that most people take for granted.



One of my father's corn labels that would go on every crate before it was shipped. He thought the label would get the attention of produce buyers, and it did.